*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
For the week of March 23, 1998

Are you ready to give Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer the old heave-ho? This week, Kevin takes a look at Opera, a slim alternative web browser that may be just what you're looking for.

=*=*= OPERA, NO FAT LADY =*=*=

You either love your web browser or you don't. If you don't love yours -- if it has crashed once too often, is slower than molasses, or is too bloated to work well on your computer -- you know what to do: switch browsers. And you know what the choices are, right? Most users see the Net through either Microsoft Internet Explorer (IE) or Netscape Navigator. If the thought of switching from one bloated, fussy browser to another bloated, fussy browser doesn't thrill you, you'll be happy to know that there is another choice. It is called Opera.

Opera is the product of a small Norwegian company. Although it isn't nearly as well-known as Navigator or Internet Explorer, its popularity is growing -- and many of its users seem to be rabid fans who will make sure this software gets noticed.

Opera's primary allure is its size -- or lack thereof. The installer takes up only 1.1 megabytes, a quick download that's a far cry from Navigator's and IE's humongous installers. (Netscape's minimum installer is an 8.3 MB download; the smallest Internet Explorer installer weighs in at 12.3 MB. Opera's installer, on the other hand, fits on a floppy disk.) Once installed, Opera remains svelte: if your computer has only 6 MB of RAM and 2 MB of free disk space to its name, Opera can live with that. By comparison, Internet Explorer eats 8 MB RAM and 40 MB of disk space; Netscape Navigator consumes at least 11 MB of disk space. And while Navigator and IE require at least a 486, the makers of Opera assert that it will work swimmingly on an old 386SX PC.

So, if you've got a slow PC with limited RAM, Opera sounds like the real deal. It may also be attractive to laptop users short on storage space. What's the allure if you're blessed with a Pentium with plenty of RAM and drive space to burn? Despite its size, Opera is a fast, stable browser with a strong set of features. I'll say it again: Browsing the web with Opera is _fast_. Without the overhead of the big browsers, Opera can display pages as quickly as you can download them. There's no annoying lag when you press a link or hit the back button. Boom, it's there.

Opera delivers most of the features you've come to expect in a browser, including support for cookies, frames and tables, animated GIFs, proxies, imagemaps, JavaScript, and compatibility with Netscape plug-ins. The program is very customizable -- you can disable any of those features and tweak the user interface to your heart's content.

Opera doesn't do it all. The current version doesn't work with Java (which you may consider a blessing or a curse) -- Java is slated for version 4, due this summer. Nor does it do ActiveX. Since Opera strictly adheres to the HTML standard, it may not correctly display web pages that use funky Netscape- or Explorer-specific tags. Opera worked perfectly in most of my tests: I checked my stocks at

my.yahoo.com, downloaded clip art, stored cookies, filled out forms and surfed with wild abandon. Some complex web pages may not be displayed properly. I had a few problems with forms with radio buttons, and couldn't manage to log into HotWired. Other than that, no bad news.

The program avoids much of the baggage (and some of the features) common in other browsers: there's only minimal e-mail support (you can send mail but not read it), and you won't find a push client or webtop access -- certainly no loss if you ask me. It does offer a simple Usenet newsreader (which allows offline reading), FTP, gopher, WAIS access, SSL encryption and nimble bookmarking functions.

There's something else fundamentally different about Opera: Unlike Navigator and IE, Opera is not free software. You can try it for a month. If you use it for longer, you're expected to pay $35. The makers of the program acknowledge that software development takes time and money, that they can't compete with the mega-corporations' practice of giving away their work, and that even "free" software from Netscape and Microsoft comes at a price. My recommendation: don't try Opera unless you're willing to shell out $35 if you fall in love with it. You have been warned.

Today, Opera is available only for Windows 3.1, 95 and NT. Versions for other platforms, including Macintosh, OS/2 and Linux, are in the works. The Opera web site has a web page detailing the development progress on each platform.

Can a $35 browser survive in a world already populated with two popular, free browsers, ones that have more features and bigger budgets? I don't know. I'll steal an opinion from a colleague who opined, "I think they'll really have to differentiate and offer real advantages to a specific market in order to stay around. Huge companies are giving away something they are trying to sell."

As I was editing this article, Netscape Navigator crashed my computer for a reason known only to itself. Just one more reminder that although Opera isn't the perfect browser, it may be a better choice than any of the alternatives.

Opera is available from http://www.operasoftware.com.

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

Copyright 1998 by Kevin Savetz.